

Were Israelis Detained on Sept. 11 Spies?

2006-01-06

go.com

Millions saw the horrific images of the World Trade Center attacks, and those who saw them won't forget them. But a New Jersey homemaker saw something that morning that prompted an investigation into five young Israelis and their possible connection to Israeli intelligence.

Maria, who asked us not to use her last name, had a view of the World Trade Center from her New Jersey apartment building. She remembers a neighbor calling her shortly after the first plane hit the towers.

She grabbed her binoculars and watched the destruction unfolding in lower Manhattan. But as she watched the disaster, something else caught her eye.

Maria says she saw three young men kneeling on the roof of a white van in the parking lot of her apartment building. "They seemed to be taking a movie," Maria said.

The men were taking video or photos of themselves with the World Trade Center burning in the background, she said. What struck Maria were the expressions on the men's faces. "They were like happy, you know ... They didn't look shocked to me. I thought it was very strange," she said.

She found the behavior so suspicious that she wrote down the license plate number of the van and called the police. Before long, the FBI was also on the scene, and a statewide bulletin was issued on the van.

The plate number was traced to a van owned by a company called Urban Moving. Around 4 p.m. on Sept. 11, the van was spotted on a service road off Route 3, near New Jersey's Giants Stadium. A police officer pulled the van over, finding five men, between 22 and 27 years old, in the vehicle. The men were taken out of the van at gunpoint and handcuffed by police.

The arresting officers said they saw a lot that aroused their suspicion about the men. One of the passengers had \$4,700 in cash hidden in his sock. Another was carrying two foreign passports. A box cutter was found in the van. But perhaps the biggest surprise for the officers came when the five men identified themselves as Israeli citizens.

'We Are Not Your Problem'

According to the police report, one of the passengers told the officers they had been on the West Side Highway in Manhattan "during the incident" — referring to the World Trade Center attack. The driver of the van, Sivan Kurzberg, told the officers, "We are Israeli. We are not your problem. Your problems are our problems. The Palestinians are the problem." The other passengers were his brother Paul Kurzberg, Yaron Shmuel, Oded Ellner and Omer Marmari.

When the men were transferred to jail, the case was transferred out of the FBI's Criminal Division, and into the bureau's Foreign Counterintelligence Section, which is responsible for espionage cases, ABCNEWS has learned.

One reason for the shift, sources told ABCNEWS, was that the FBI believed Urban Moving may have been providing cover for an Israeli intelligence operation.

After the five men were arrested, the FBI got a warrant and searched Urban Moving's Weehawken, N.J.,

offices.

The FBI searched Urban Moving's offices for several hours, removing boxes of documents and a dozen computer hard drives. The FBI also questioned Urban Moving's owner. His attorney insists that his client answered all of the FBI's questions. But when FBI agents tried to interview him again a few days later, he was gone.

Three months later 2020's cameras photographed the inside of Urban Moving, and it looked as if the business had been shut down in a big hurry. Cell phones were lying around; office phones were still connected; and the property of dozens of clients remained in the warehouse.

The owner had also cleared out of his New Jersey home, put it up for sale and returned with his family to Israel.

'A Scary Situation'

Steven Gordon, the attorney for the five Israeli detainees, acknowledged that his clients' actions on Sept. 11 would easily have aroused suspicions. "You got a group of guys that are taking pictures, on top of a roof, of the World Trade Center. They're speaking in a foreign language. They got two passports on 'em. One's got a wad of cash on him, and they got box cutters. Now that's a scary situation."

But Gordon insisted that his clients were just five young men who had come to America for a vacation, ended up working for a moving company, and were taking pictures of the event.

The five Israelis were held at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, ostensibly for overstaying their tourist visas and working in the United States illegally. Two weeks after their arrest, an immigration judge ordered them to be deported. But sources told ABCNEWS that FBI and CIA officials in Washington put a hold on the case.

The five men were held in detention for more than two months. Some of them were placed in solitary confinement for 40 days, and some of them were given as many as seven lie-detector tests.

Plenty of Speculation

Since their arrest, plenty of speculation has swirled about the case, and what the five men were doing that morning. Eventually, The Forward, a respected Jewish newspaper in New York, reported the FBI concluded that two of the men were Israeli intelligence operatives.

Vince Cannistraro, a former chief of operations for counterterrorism with the CIA who is now a consultant for ABCNEWS, said federal authorities' interest in the case was heightened when some of the men's names were found in a search of a national intelligence database.

Israeli Intelligence Connection?

According to Cannistraro, many people in the U.S. intelligence community believed that some of the men arrested were working for Israeli intelligence. Cannistraro said there was speculation as to whether Urban Moving had been "set up or exploited for the purpose of launching an intelligence operation against radical Islamists in the area, particularly in the New Jersey-New York area."

Under this scenario, the alleged spying operation was not aimed against the United States, but at penetrating or monitoring radical fund-raising and support networks in Muslim communities like Paterson,

N.J., which was one of the places where several of the hijackers lived in the months prior to Sept. 11.

For the FBI, deciphering the truth from the five Israelis proved to be difficult. One of them, Paul Kurzberg, refused to take a lie-detector test for 10 weeks — then failed it, according to his lawyer. Another of his lawyers told us Kurzberg had been reluctant to take the test because he had once worked for Israeli intelligence in another country.

Sources say the Israelis were targeting these fund-raising networks because they were thought to be channeling money to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, groups that are responsible for most of the suicide bombings in Israel. "[The] Israeli government has been very concerned about the activity of radical Islamic groups in the United States that could be a support apparatus to Hamas and Islamic Jihad," Cannistraro said.

The men denied that they had been working for Israeli intelligence out of the New Jersey moving company, and Ram Horvitz, their Israeli attorney, dismissed the allegations as "stupid and ridiculous."

Mark Regev, the spokesman for the Israeli Embassy in Washington, goes even further, asserting the issue was never even discussed with U.S. officials.

"These five men were not involved in any intelligence operation in the United States, and the American intelligence authorities have never raised this issue with us," Regev said. "The story is simply false."

No 'Pre-Knowledge'

Despite the denials, sources tell ABCNEWS there is still debate within the FBI over whether or not the young men were spies. Many U.S. government officials still believe that some of them were on a mission for Israeli intelligence. But the FBI told ABCNEWS, "To date, this investigation has not identified anybody who in this country had pre-knowledge of the events of 9/11."

Sources also said that even if the men were spies, there is no evidence to conclude they had advance knowledge of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11. The investigation, at the end of the day, after all the polygraphs, all of the field work, all the cross-checking, the intelligence work, concluded that they probably did not have advance knowledge of 9/11," Cannistraro noted.

As to what they were doing on the van, they say they read about the attack on the Internet, couldn't see it from their offices and went to the parking lot for a better view. But no one has been able to find a good explanation for why they may have been smiling with the towers of the World Trade Center burning in the background. Both the lawyers for the young men and the Israeli Embassy chalk it up to immature conduct.

According to ABCNEWS sources, Israeli and U.S. government officials worked out a deal — and after 71 days, the five Israelis were taken out of jail, put on a plane, and deported back home.

While the former detainees refused to answer ABCNEWS' questions about their detention and what they were doing on Sept. 11, several of the detainees discussed their experience in America on an Israeli talk show after their return home.

Said one of the men, denying that they were laughing or happy on the morning of Sept. 11, "The fact of the matter is we are coming from a country that experiences terror daily. Our purpose was to document the event."

ABCNEWS' Chris Isham, John Miller, Glenn Silber and Chris Vlasto contributed to this report.

82 Comments

- [Shares](#)
- [Email](#)

A [Bernie Sanders](#) campaign staffer was fired on Wednesday after allegedly accessing data from the [Hillary Clinton](#) campaign, and it has created quite a problem for the Sanders campaign.

The Democratic National Committee has suspended the Sanders campaign's access to its voter data. Sanders campaign officials defended themselves during a news conference today, saying they are running a "clean" campaign and that they in fact "alerted" the DNC two months ago that campaign data was available to others.

The campaign emphasized that this is not the first time the technology company "allows" serious "failures" to happen, and that Sanders' campaign no longer has any of the Clinton campaign's data.

Now, documents obtained by ABC News show at least four individual Sanders staffers accessed Clinton voter data during a security glitch and saved the data.

The situation has turned into a he-said-she-said debate of what happened, but here's a breakdown of the latest on the DNC voter database breach:

[Documents Show at Least 4 Sanders Staffers Accessed Clinton Voter Data](#)
[Bernie Sanders Campaign Fires Staffer for Allegedly Accessing Clinton Campaign Data](#)
[Sanders Pulls Negative Web Ad on Clinton](#)

What Kind of Information Was Accessed by the Sanders Staffer and How:

The technology company, NGP VAN, gets voter information from "public voter registration data," according to a current user of the database who is not related to the investigation, does not work for the DNC or either campaigns.

NGP VAN purchases that information from state election boards or secretary of state offices. The DNC hires NGP VAN, and the "DNC then goes into a contractual agreement to make the database available to democratic campaigns," the user told ABC News.

In the database provided by the DNC, all campaigns have access to basic voter ID information: name, phone number and address of a Democratic voter.

Each campaign uses that information to contact voters and collect their own details like the voter's support level for a candidate, how persuadable the voter is, and specific issues the voter is interested in. So the Sanders and Clinton camps could have two different voter profiles for the same voter.

In this instance, the Sanders campaign could have seen what information the other campaign might have collected on someone -- potentially valuable information for a rival campaign.

If the Clinton campaign has marked someone as a surefire Clinton supporter, then the Sanders campaign wouldn't bother with that voter. But if the Clinton campaign marked them as "on the fence" and interested in "college tuition," for example, or a Sanders donor, then the Sanders campaign would want to try really hard to get that person to the polls.

What the Sanders Campaign Is Saying

In a news conference outside Sanders' campaign headquarters today in Washington, D.C., Jeff Weaver, Sanders' campaign manager, blamed the incident on the DNC and the software vendor used by the DNC.

"Two months ago, shortly after our digital vendor that conducts modelling for our campaign told us that there was a failure in the firewall that prevents campaigns from seeing one another's data. We contacted the DNC and told them about this failure," Weaver said today.

It was "dangerous incompetence, and it was our campaign that alerted them that the campaign data was being made available to other campaigns," Weaver said.

Weaver also acknowledged that more than one staffer may be involved: "It was clear that some of the staffers irresponsibly accessed some of the data from another campaign, and that behavior is unacceptable to the Sanders' campaign."

"We do not have any of their data, and we do not want their data. We are running a clean campaign, and we are going to beat Secretary Clinton and the campaign on the issues," Weaver said during a news conference today. "We don't need dirty tricks. That's not how we run it."

Weaver also called the DNC's suspension of the campaign's access to the voter data "unacceptable" and implied the organization was trying to sabotage the Vermont senator's campaign.

What the Sanders Staffer Is Saying

ABC News spoke to Josh Uretsky, the Sanders campaign staffer who was fired after viewing Clinton campaign data.

Uretsky said he was trying to investigate the data issue, to see what information was vulnerable on their end, so he could adequately report it to the software company. He said his team did not export any data. He said he intentionally left a record of what he was doing in the system and did not try to hide his actions.

"The breach was in no way our fault. I saw it and attempted to investigate and attempted to do it in a transparent manner," he said. "To my knowledge, we did not take anything out of the system it was in and did not gain anything out of it. We saw a security breach and we tried to assess it and understand it."

When asked why he did not simply raise his hand immediately and poked around in the system at all, he emphasized he was intentionally being "transparent."

"You see something, you investigate it first. ... I knew full well that I was creating a record that the administrators could see," Uretsky said.

Uretsky said he had been with the campaign for three months.

What the DNC Is Saying

"Once the DNC became aware that the Sanders campaign had inappropriately and systematically accessed Clinton campaign data, and in doing so violated the agreement that all the presidential campaigns have signed with the DNC, as the agreement provides, we directed NGP VAN to suspend the Sanders campaign's access to the system until the DNC is provided with a full accounting of whether or not this information was used and the way in which it was disposed. I have personally reached out to Senator

Sanders to make sure that he is aware of the situation. When we receive this report from the Sanders campaign, we will make a determination on re-enabling the campaign's access to the system," DNC Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz said in a statement Friday.

"Upon being made aware of the situation, the DNC immediately directed NGP VAN to conduct a thorough analysis to identify any users who may have accessed data inappropriately and pinpoint exactly what actions any such users took in the system, and to report these findings to the DNC," the statement read.

Wasserman Schultz, D-Florida, said Friday she was troubled by the Sanders campaign taking advantage of the software glitch to access the Clinton campaign's voter data.

"It was a temporary glitch through a software patch that opened this window. The troubling thing is that one campaign took advantage of the opening of that window, and accessed the information of the other," she said in an interview off the House floor.

"We want to make sure we're not just taking our vendor's word for it or the Sanders' campaign," she said.

Wasserman Schultz said she has confidence in the integrity of the DNC's data system after the episode.

Wasserman Schultz also told MSNBC on Friday that the "Sanders campaign not only viewed the Clinton campaign's proprietary data, but from what we're being told, downloaded it, exported it and downloaded it. We have a variety of back-and-forth."

What DNC and NGP VAN Critics Are Saying

A former senior Democratic Party staffer who works specifically in data and tech told ABC News: "The data breach was 100 percent NGP VAN 's fault" and argued that the Sanders campaign "has a strong leg to stand on" in arguing that their access to the main voter files be reinstated.

"I'd be saying, 'your vendor made a mistake, your tool was broken, don't blame us,'" the former senior party staffer said.

A petition on moveon.org, which has gathered over 100,000 signatures, is demanding that Wasserman Schultz reinstate Sanders's access to the voter file.

What NGP VAN Is Saying

Stu Trevelyan, CEO of NGP VAN, said in the company's 19-year history, they have not had a problem with security and privacy of their customers' data as it is their "top priority."

"The one area that was impacted was voter file data," Trevelyan said in a statement obtained by ABC News. "We are confident at this point that no campaigns have access to or have retained any voter file data of any other clients; with one possible exception, one of the presidential campaigns. NGP VAN is providing a thorough report to the DNC on what happened and conducting a review to ensure the integrity of the system."

"We immediately began an audit to determine if any users had intentionally or unintentionally gained access to data they normally would not have access to. And determined that only one campaign took actions that could possibly have led to it retaining data to which it should not have had access," Trevelyan said.

At the request of the DNC on Thursday, Sanders campaign access was suspended, the company said, emphasizing that the company played no role in making that decision, and "contractually" could not.

What the Clinton Campaign Is Saying

"We were informed that our proprietary data was breached by Sanders campaign staff in 25 searches by four different accounts and that this data was saved into the Sanders' campaign account. We are asking that the Sanders campaign and the DNC work expeditiously to ensure that our data is not in the Sanders campaign's account and that the Sanders campaign only have access to their own data," Hillary for America National Press Secretary Brian Fallon said in a statement today.

How It Could Affect the Sanders Campaign

Since the DNC has suspended the Sanders campaign's party voter data -- the presidential hopeful's field organizing and campaigning efforts could be affected six weeks before the first primary votes are cast in the Iowa caucuses.

What Happens Now

The DNC has ordered NGP VAN -- the technology company -- to conduct an audit.

"The DNC has directed NGP VAN to begin a review process of their internal procedures to identify how this mistake was allowed to happen and prevent further such mistakes. In addition to this full and complete internal audit which we have instructed NGP VAN to conduct, we are also beginning the process of securing an independent audit by a data security firm of the company's procedures.

The Sanders campaign noted that isn't waiting around.

"We are announcing today if the DNC continues to hold our data hostage and continues to attack the heart and soul of our grassroots campaign, we will be in federal court this afternoon seeking immediate relief," Sanders Campaign Manager Jeff Weaver said today during a news conference.

ABC News' Shushannah Walshe, Josh Haskell and Liz Kreutz contributed to this report.

Get real-time updates as this story unfolds. To start, just "star" this story in ABC News' phone app. Download ABC News for iPhone [here](#) or ABC News for Android [here](#).

Copyright (c) 2015 ABC News Internet Ventures